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SUBJECT: LEBANON: UNIFIL COMMANDER ASKS FOR HELP IN
REACHING GHAJAR AGREEMENT

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Force Commander General Claudio Graziano, speaking on October 9 at a regular United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) mission update briefing to the diplomatic corps, described the withdrawal of Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) from northern Ghajar as a critical step towards successful implementation of UNSC Resolution 1701 and said he took full responsibility for the process. Because he believed the withdrawal is tied to UNIFIL's future success, he commented, "It must not fail."

2. (C) Graziano also said UNSC Resolution 1701 entailed more than the deployment of UNIFIL, and achieving a permanent cease fire and long-term solution ultimately depends on a political solution. He described his area of operations (the area south of the Litani River) as "calm," highlighted good relations with the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), and claimed there were no breaches of the cessation of hostilities in and "no evidence of attempts to smuggle weapons" into his operating area. End summary.

UNIFIL SEEKING RESOLUTION ON GHAJAR

3. (C) UNIFIL Force Commander General Claudio Graziano and his staff on October 9 briefed invited diplomatic representatives, including PolMilOff, on recent developments. Graziano's new Chief of Staff, French Brigadier General Oliver de Bavinchove, opened the briefing with an organizational update highlighting the recent departure of a 3,000 soldier LAF brigade to north Lebanon. This departure leaves only three LAF brigades in the area of operations. Additionally, he said, of the originally mandated 12,000 troops for UNIFIL, it was still short 3,000 soldiers. In his overview of operations, de Bavinchove said the area was "unstable," IDF air violations continued as a source of tension, and drug smuggling was still prevalent. The UNIFIL maritime force was becoming extremely expensive to support and its ability to conduct at-sea interdictions and inspections was under-utilized, he added.

4. (C) De Bavinchove, noting the lack of rapid progress on issues such as border demarcation, called for patience in implementing UNSC Resolution 1701, joking that, "It will take

200 years to mark the Blue Line." He warned that there must be positive, noticeable steps forward by the end of 2009 or support from donor nations for UNIFIL could begin to erode. There was a growing perception that UNIFIL was too passive and a scapegoat for non-action, and that only progress on the issues, such as a successful handover of northern Ghajar, would alleviate those perceptions.

15. (C) The UNIFIL briefers also presented the current seven-point UNIFIL proposal for IDF withdrawal from northern Ghajar. Graziano later commented that UNIFIL would take full responsibility for the implementation of the Ghajar agreement, which he believed would lead to further successes under 1701. De Bavinchove told PolMilOff after the formal presentation that he believed all parties had a strong desire to conclude an agreement, especially Israel, as Ghajar was a "drug smugglers nest" and a burden to Israel. (Note: A Lebanese press report on October 11 stated the Israeli Army leadership reportedly had told UNIFIL command that Israeli withdrawal could start before the end of October. Another report from pro-Syrian As-Safir newspaper stated the withdrawal will be set once a new Israeli government is formed. End note.)

16. (C) The UNIFIL proposal calls for a complete IDF withdrawal from northern Ghajar and its surrounding area labeled by UNIFIL as 14B. (Note: Area 14B is uninhabited farmland to the immediate south and east of the town limits, consisting of small farming plots and small buildings. End note.) UNIFIL will verify the withdrawal of the IDF. Afterwards, only UNIFIL will have access to area 14B. The

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LAF will be permitted one observer located with UNIFIL, but no other LAF personnel will deploy in the area. UNIFIL will determine the timing of the handover of northern Ghajar to the LAF, while maintaining responsibility for area 14B. UNIFIL representatives described the proposal as a "skeleton agreement" due to the many issues to be resolved once the withdrawal takes place, such as the disposition of the Israeli citizens in northern Ghajar. They noted that the UNIFIL objectives are to implement 1701, reduce tensions amongst all parties, and increase confidence in diplomatic efforts to maintain stability.

UNIFIL COMMANDER CALLS FOR SUPPORT

17. (C) Graziano concluded the briefing with his assessment of UNIFIL accomplishments: UNIFIL cooperation with the LAF and IDF was good, there were (despite allegations to the contrary) no breaches of the cessation of hostilities, and there was no evidence of attempts to smuggle weapons into UNIFIL's area of operations. Graziano did note, however, that there had been two rocket attacks against Israel from UNIFIL's area of operations in the last 15 months and three attacks against UNIFIL on its main supply routes.

18. (C) Graziano also appealed for more support at "the political and strategic level." He said the work on northern Ghajar was critical and requested international backing and promotion of UNIFIL's proposal. Additionally, he asked for more logistical assistance for the LAF. In the near-term, facilitating the withdrawal of the IDF from northern Ghajar was paramount. He also mentioned plans to focus UNIFIL capabilities on Blue Line demarcation and strengthening the security of the area. Relations with the local population would continue to be a priority, he said, citing 1701's specific provisions for the protection of civilians.

SISON